

The Differences Between Us

By FangirlingStrangerThings



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Summary: The Life You Deserve Universe. A Lumax short story involving the whole party. Lucas and Max have been a couple for three years, all seems well in their relationship until insecurities that were buried deep start to resurface. Can they make it through the differences between them when religion and racial hatred tries to undermine their love? Warning for sexual themes and racism.

1. Ashamed

The Differences Between Us

AN: Hello everyone it's me! And I'm back in The Life You Deserve universe! It has taken so long for me to really write anything. I was suffering writer's block and then writing what I thought people wanted rather than what I wanted to write. But my guy reminded me to write what I felt like, and so this story that had been in my head for a long time has finally come to life :-> I hope you enjoy it!

Chapter 1: Ashamed

Summer 1987

The room was quiet except for the occasional scratch of pen against paper as Lucas worked on his English literature paper, his forehead resting in the palm of his left hand while he narrowed his eyes and tried to think of a good start to his next paragraph.

He sighed heavily knowing that this class was kicking his ass and maybe it was time to accept the help offered by El who was exceeding in the subject and had a real passion for it. Lucas's educational passion was numbers, figures and things that made *logical* sense. Not something that required this amount of imagination or such an in-depth thought process.

He reached for his soda can, gulping down the sugary drink and shaking his shoulders as if hoping it would loosen the writer's block plaguing him as he attempted once again to start his new paragraph.

For a while he was able to work, away from the distraction that was Erica who was at a friend's house probably talking about boys and make up, or whatever 12 year old girls did. It wasn't until the familiar creaks and pounds outside of Lucas's window began did he look up from his paper, a smiling already curving his lips as his heart squeezed with exhilaration.

He was just standing up when dark red hair appeared at the window and he bashfully smiled at his girlfriend as her face propped up into

view, her pale cheeks slightly pink from the exertion of scaling the side of his house.

Lucas carefully opened the window, thankful that his bedroom was facing the woods and not the prying neighbours on the other side.

"Good evening stalker," Max grinned, her smile causing Lucas's own smile to extend to the point of his cheeks aching.

He looked at her intently, amusement playing in his eyes as he bit into his lower lip and held out his hands to help her up into the bedroom. "I think *you* climbing up the side of my house and getting in through *my* window makes you more of a stalker than me, right?"

"You love it."

"I know."

Lucas carefully tugged Max into the room and she hoisted herself over the window frame, well-rehearsed on where to put her feet after years of doing this same trip into her boyfriend's bedroom.

"Is Erica home?" Max asked the moment she landed on her feet, brushing a few stray leaves off her light blue jeans. Lucas would be lying if he said his eyes didn't follow her hands, his gaze lingering on her lean legs for a moment. He gulped and looked back up at his girlfriend who was smirking at him playfully. He blushed remembering how quick to the mark Max was - she didn't miss anything.

"Um no, Erica is at Daisy's house. Or is it Deana?" Lucas asked puzzled, scratching the back of his head. One of these days he would listen to his sister's ramblings about her posse.

"I think you mean Dana," Max replied with a playful eye roll as she bounced on the end of Lucas bed, kicking off her converses and scooting herself up to the headboard. "And your parents? Where are they?"

"Still at work," Lucas replied quickly, his heart jumping into his throat with excitement as he saw the meaning in Max's blue eyes. She beckoned him forward with her finger, a teasing smile on her lips.

"Neil's working and mom thinks I'm at El's. So...I believe we have a bit of alone time *at last*," Max said with a knowing grin as she pulled off her jacket.

"Yeah," Lucas whispered breathlessly, his eyes fixated on his beautiful girlfriend, heat racing to the surface of his skin. It wasn't like this was the first time they had done anything sexual, but between an annoying little sister, religious parents and a stepfather whose views Max tried to hide from Lucas, they rarely found moments like these. Unless it was in the back of their cars, and while that was always fun, it felt like at all times they were having to hide away. Like their relationship was something to be frowned upon.

And while Lucas tried to ignore the way people would look at him and Max, stunned and sometimes disgusted expressions on worn faces at the interracial couple, he couldn't pretend it didn't bother him. And when he truly was alone at night, staring in the dark at his ceiling, his thoughts open to be explored, he worried about what life he was giving Max. What ridicule she was getting because of him. And what if they were going to have children in the future? Would they experience the same racism from single minded people who couldn't see past the colour of someone's skin?

"What are you waiting for?" Max huffed, her chest heaving a frustrated sigh as Lucas blinked and looked back at her, shaking his head slightly to clear his thoughts.

"Sorry," he exhaled, crawling onto the bed and allowing a smile filled with happiness at the beautiful girl in front of him, with the sparkling blue eyes and mischievous smile who was waiting for him. Who *wanted* him. Through the turbulence of his conflicted thoughts, he could never question her love. Even if they didn't say it every day like Mike and El seemed to do, he could see her feelings as clear as day in the brightness of her eyes and in the quickening pace of his heart.

"Come here stalker," Max whispered as she pushed forward, her slightly cold hands cupping Lucas's face as she brought it eagerly to her own, their lips finding each other almost immediately.

A hum of relief escaped Max's throat and Lucas found himself smiling against her soft lips before angling his head and deepening the kiss.

Their breathing was heavy and their tongues hot as Max leaned back against the pillows, bringing Lucas down with her, her legs wrapping around his waist as his firm chest pushed down on her own.

Her hands travelled down his back, his muscles jumping at her touch before she grabbed a fistful of his sweater and pulled it up. Lucas leaned back to pull the material free from his upper body and it landed somewhere on his bedroom floor. His attention was immediately brought back to Max, lust in her eyes as her hands slid up his bare abs, across his chest and then wrapped around his neck pulling him back down to her waiting lips.

Their kisses were becoming more urgent, their breaths wavering and pounding hearts filled with desire as Lucas's hand slid under Max's shirt, heat building in his stomach as he felt her soft skin against his rough hand.

Her fingers hurried to join him and within seconds her shirt had joined his sweater on the floor. Lucas pulled back enough to look down at his girlfriend. Her chest heaving in a black bra and her pale skin toned and beautiful. *She* was beautiful. Lucas's blown pupils met with Max's and she smiled slightly, a vulnerability in her gaze that she only ever displayed when they were like this, stripping down and exposing their true selves to one another.

Lucas leaned back down, propping himself up on his elbows but allowing himself to get closer to Max, nudging her freckled nose with his while his heart felt like it was expanding at the cute little cringe his girlfriend made.

"I love you," he whispered, his eyes dancing over Max's face before meeting her stunning eyes.

She sighed softly, a grin twitching on her lips and a pretty blush creeping onto her cheeks as she brushed her fingers across Lucas's jawline. "And I love you," she said in a tone so precious to him, because only *he* got to see this side of her.

Not even El would ever be able to see this Max. It was a side to his girlfriend that was rare, a side where she held up no walls and didn't hide behind sarcasm or humour. It reminded Lucas of the night on

top of the bus. They had barely known each other, but it had been a poignant moment of honesty and he would never forget it.

Their lips crashed together, their breaths unsteady and warm as they mingled, their mouths working as one, every touch sending electricity down their bodies. Max's fingers moved up and down Lucas's muscular back, her finger tips digging into his skin slightly, causing a shudder from him and for goose bumps to rise on his skin.

His palm moved down Max's bare stomach, her skin so incredibly soft to touch as his fingers trailed to the button of her jeans, fumbling to undo it while keeping their lips tightly locked together. Lucas felt almost lightheaded as their tongues stroked one another, the sensation making him feel heady and too warm for the summer evening.

Max's hands were wandering too, her fingers dragging slowly up his thigh and moving further up, making Lucas exhale a sharp breath and close his eyes, as her touch eased some of the intense pressure he was feeling, but at the same time only fuelled the fire in the pit of his stomach.

Through the intoxication that plagued his mind like a fog, he heard the distant side of a car, it grew louder and louder, enough to make Max pull away from his lips. They both froze, their breathing uneven, their lips slightly swollen and their eyes dazed. The unmistakable sound of the rickety garage door opening brought Lucas back to reality, crashing down from his lust and need for Max.

"*Shit*," Lucas whispered in a panic, jumping away from Max and lifting his heavy body off the bed, his hands already yanking at his now restricted shorts as he tried to rearrange them in the same moment he grabbed his shirt off the bedroom floor and threw Max's to her.

She caught it, a disgruntled look on her face, her red hair a mess around her head as she watched Lucas hurry to put on his clothes. Her fist tightened around her shirt, but she didn't put it on just yet.

"My mom is going to ground me if she finds you in my room," Lucas mumbled to himself as he hurried to lock the bedroom door for good

measure.

Max blinked, her blue eyes narrowing, her sexual frustration etching into the tightness of her jaw as she finally put on her shirt. "Don't worry," she said quietly, her voice oddly tense. "I'll just go down the drain pipe, your mommy will never need to know."

"Max," Lucas warned, his brow lowering.

"No don't worry about it," Max huffed as she buttoned her jeans back up and swung her legs over the side of the bed, tying her converses. "I wouldn't want her knowing about the dirty little secret in your room - "

Lucas froze for a moment, Max's words hitting him as if she had slapped him across the face. "How could you call yourself that?" he asked stunned, annoyance starting to bubble up inside of him. "My parents have known we've been dating for *three* years! Mom keeps asking to invite you to dinner Max, you *know* this!"

A short and frustrated noise that could barely constitute as a laugh left Max's throat as she shook her head and walked towards the window. "Well she'll be disappointed then." She lifted the window pane, her whole body tense and almost shaking while Lucas stood in confusion feeling the anger bubble over.

He couldn't count the amount of times that his parents had asked for Max to come over for dinner. They had met her of course, but only really when the whole party was together. She never liked to be the centre of attention and always came up with excuses to skip any one to one time with the Sinclair's, unless it was Lucas or Erica alone.

An insecurity that had seeped into Lucas's mind many years earlier, started to creep through the cracks, his mind fogging once more, but not from desire, from complete and utter frustration at the situation. "Well at least my parents *know* about us! *Your* parents don't. Are...are you ashamed of me or something? Is it because I'm black?"

Max already had her legs out of the window, ready to jump when Lucas's words hit her, and she froze. She turned to look at him almost in slow motion, and from the widening of her sharp blue eyes and her

gaping mouth, Lucas knew he had said the wrong thing. He could see a complexity of emotions building up inside of her, she looked like she was about to snap, her blue eyes getting unusually misty.

"Of course I'm not ashamed of you!" she practically shouted, Lucas not even flinching at the idea that his mom might hear. "How could you ever *think* that?!" She closed her eyes, taking a shuddering breath before opening her wet lashes once more and staring straight at Lucas.

"I'm ashamed of *them*."

Lucas blinked in confusion, his brow etched as he opened his mouth to speak.

"Lucas honey? Are you okay up there?!" called the voice of Jada Sinclair, the side door to the garage closing as she clearly entered the family home.

Lucas didn't say anything, staring straight back at Max, trying to understand what she meant and why the words had affected her this badly. But his chance was gone. For now at least.

There was movement on the stairs and Max's gaze flickered away from Lucas as she looked down at the ground beyond the window ledge. "Don't worry, I'll let myself out. Wouldn't want to get you in trouble," she muttered before disappearing out of view, leaving Lucas stood in confusion, his mother's knocking finally breaking him out of the reverie that Max had left within him.

The moment Max's converses pressed into the yellow starched grass, she was moving, her head a flurry of frustration and regret as she slipped into the tree line and moved further down the street to where she had parked her car, her beautiful mustang, a gift off her dad when she got her driver's permit.

Max's only destination was home, to get under her comforter and stay there. That was the one thought in her mind as she pulled on her seat belt and started the engine. Her knuckles turned white from her grip on the steering wheel as she pulled away from the curb and

continued down Maple street, her speed increasing as her mind replayed the things she had said to Lucas.

She frowned, not wanting to be reminded of where she might have gone wrong, idly reaching for the radio, finding a station. Max sighed in relief when Bon Jovi's powerful voice filled the quiet night. The sun was an orange glow on the horizon, the sky a beautiful artwork of indigo, dark inky blue with a streak of pink splashed across it.

"Oh there's nowhere to run. No one can save me, the damage is done! Shot through the heart and you're to blame, you give love a bad name..."

Max's gaze flickered momentarily from the road to glare at the radio, sharply turning to another station and sighing in relief when Whitney Houston began to play.

"Falling in love is so bittersweet. This love is strong, why do I feel weak? If he loves me, if he loves me not..."

Max scowled, her lips pursed as she once more turned to another station that was still on a commercial break, needing something, *anything* that wouldn't make her think of Lucas or how she was such a terrible girlfriend. He deserved better, she knew that, probably the whole of Hawkins High knew that.

"You with the sad eyes. Don't be discouraged, oh I realise it's hard to take courage. In a world full of people you can lose sight of it all. And the darkness inside you can make you feel so small..."

Max's exhaled a sharp breath, her nostrils flaring as she accepted her fate. "Damn you Cyndi," she muttered, slowing down as she got closer to the end of the road.

"But I see your true colours shining through. I see your true colours and that's why I love you. So don't be afraid to let them show your true colours. True colours are beautiful like a rainbow."

Her fingers moved to the indicator, autopilot wanting to flick the switch left, but a courage building inside of her to flick the black switch right and manoeuvre the car to where she knew she would be able to get some true and honest advice.

The wheels of the Mustang crunched across the gravel drive as Max finally pulled up in front of the Byers/Hopper's residence. She killed the engine and watched as the headlights dimmed back down, giving her a moment to take a deep breath and get out of the car.

Max wasn't surprised when the front door opened before she had reached the top step, she wasn't exactly a quiet visitor between the rumble of the mustang and her heavy footsteps.

"Good evening *Maxine*," came the gruff and teasing voice of the Chief from where he stood waiting for her, leaning against the doorframe, his large arms crossed in a casual manner.

Max *knew* he was baiting her with her full name, it was almost a running routine, if not a *ritual* between them to tease and taunt one another before Max would part ways to go and hang out with her best friend.

But tonight wasn't the night. "Evening Chief," Max tried to say as casually as she could, barely meeting Hopper's kind eyes as she slipped past him and walked straight into the living area. "Where's my girl?"

Hopper watched Max for a moment, his lined brow creasing further in confusion at the red head's lack of a come back at getting called the name he knew she despised. He closed the door and cleared his throat, trying to pretend he didn't notice the uneasiness surrounding Max.

"She's in her room, working hard on that English lit paper. Doesn't want to be disturbed," Hopper grunted as he walked towards the kitchen where Joyce was walking out of, holding a bowl of chips which she passed to her husband with a smile.

"Hi Max honey," Joyce called, no surprise at all in her face at the teenager's arrival. After all, Max was a frequent guest at the Hopper/Byers home.

"Hi Joyce," she smiled politely. Her ears pricked, and she heard the distant sound of music playing from El's bedroom. Loud music, El needing to actually *work* on an English Literature paper and not be

disturbed? Yeah Joyce and Hopper might be naive, but Max certainly wasn't.

She tried desperately to clear the smirk on her face, arranging her face to one of innocence. "Well I'll see if El wouldn't mind a visitor. You know, she probably needs a break from all that *studying*."

Before Hopper could do more than open his mouth to respond, Max was skipping down the corridor, trying desperately to hide her sniggering. She stopped in front of El's door, her grin widening mischievously and knocked loudly, pressing her ear to the dark wood in amusement.

The distant sound of panicked whispering could be heard, then a lot of ruffling, movement, something being knocked over, was it a lamp?

"Um, o-one second!" El called, Max laughing already.

"Max is that you?!" El shouted in response.

"Yep," Max replied, looking over her shoulder towards the living room with a smirk and adding for good measure, "just here to see if you need a hand with that *English Literature* paper!"

There was more whispers and a groan of frustration before the door was unlocked and a dishevelled El appeared. Her hazel eyes wide and her hair frazzled as she grabbed Max by the hand and pulled her into the bedroom, quickly closing and locking the door behind her.

Max was already giggling even before she saw Mike sat on the end of the bed, his hair ridiculously messy, his lips swollen and pink as he feebly waved a hand in greeting to her. Max crossed her arms, a shit eating grin on her lips as she looked between the blushing couple. "Studying huh?"

The music was still playing, the vinyl half way through *Berlin* "Take My Breath Away".

"Uh, you two are such a cliché, you that right?" Max mumbled before walking further into the room and collapsing into El's pink bean bag chair.

"What are you doing here Max?" Mike asked, clearly disgruntled as he remained seated on El's bed, a pillow held tightly in his lap.

"Hey, I don't need your permission to come and visit my best friend Wheeler," Max replied, narrowing her eyes playfully at Mike who rolled his.

"Honestly, how the hell does the Chief even fall for this shit?" Max laughed indicating to El and Mike, and their creased clothing and ruffled looks.

"I think he just likes to pretend it isn't happening," El responded, shrugging her dainty shoulders as she joined Mike on the bed, taking his hand, their fingers immediately entwining in that instant way they always did. Max never understood how they could be so incredibly in sync.

There was silence between the teenagers for a moment, the powerful ballad still going as Max played with a stray thread on the seam of her shirt. It took a while for her to realise that Mike and El were both staring at her, waiting for her to off load what was clearly on her mind.

"What?" the redhead asked in feigned confusion.

El laughed gently, shaking her head. "Max. What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Max mumbled in response, her blue eyes never leaving the loose seam, already regretting wanting advice about the stupid situation she had gotten herself into.

Mike scoffed, "something's clearly wrong Max. You may as well just tell us."

Max sighed a heavy breath and looked plainly at her best friends, insecurity seeping into her blue gaze. "Me and Lucas had a fight..." she eventually muttered, immediately looking away from El and Mike.

"You guys *always* fight!" Mike laughed being shushed by El who looked nervously at her bedroom door before turning her hazel kind eyes onto her best friend.

"What was it about?"

Max's teeth sunk into her bottom lip, nibbling the skin slightly as she hesitantly looked back up and met El's eyes. Those eyes were caring, already sympathetic and Max knew she could trust them with her life. And so the words poured out, everything that had happened, while Mike and El stayed quiet, frowning slightly as they listened.

"My question is, why *haven't* you had dinner with the Sinclair's?" Mike asked in confusion. "It's not like they haven't met you before..."

"Yes, but not like this," Max stressed, her voice pained as she ran her fingers through her hair. "They're religious. I don't even *believe* in God. It's like I already *know* I'm not good enough for Lucas, do I really need them to confirm it for me? I just feel so stupid."

"You are *not* stupid," El commented, her eyes narrowed. "Believe me, I would know."

Max rolled her eyes but before she could do more than open her mouth to retort, Mike cut her off. "Max if they really didn't like you, they would have asked Lucas to break up with you a long time ago. They *know* you're his girlfriend and they clearly accept that. You are perfect for Lucas and he loves you. And they want to get to know you better, so let them." He stated, surprising both Max and El.

"What?" Mike asked after looking suspiciously between his girlfriend and friend.

El simply smiled, her eyes sparkling and a soft sigh of happiness escaping her lips as she snuggled closer to Mike, her head resting on his shoulder. "You're so sweet," she cooed making her boyfriend grin and blush.

"No you," he smirked, nuzzling her curly hair with his nose.

El giggled and went to reply when Max cut in, "oh my *god* guys! Can we just deal with my problem first?! Then I'll let you two get back to being nauseatingly fluffy!"

The couple grinned, but except for looking almost smug, nothing really changed in the way they snuggled or looked at each other with

the biggest heart eyes Max had ever witnessed. Her stomach turned, and she shuddered, bringing herself back to the reason she needed some advice.

"Okay so say I have dinner with Lucas's parents and it actually goes well and stuff. What do I do about *my* parents?"

Anyone else outside of the party would have questioned Max's statement, but El and Mike understood her meaning immediately. Billy was long gone, but his father Neil? Yeah, he was still around and without his son to verbally abuse he seemed to be even more wicked to Max's mom. She had never understood how her mother would stay with a man like that. She deserved someone to love her, *truly* love her and protect her against all harm. Not be the one to inflict that harm.

It made Max's heart pang as she thought about Lucas. Of how protective he was, loyal, determined, strong and the most wonderful of men. How could she subject him to her parents? How could she bring him around blatant racists who saw Lucas and his family as second-class citizens? How could Max stand there and call those people her family.

"I mean, do you *have* to introduce him to them?" Mike asked nervously, running a hand through his messy hair, concern written all over his face. It was clear that he wanted to protect his best friend from racism just as much as Max did.

She dipped her head and sighed heavily, "he thinks I'm ashamed of him..." The words ripped through her heart like a knife. Max sniffed a breath of indignation through her nose and smiled sadly as she looked back up at Mike and El. "How could I ever be ashamed of him? Of the colour of his skin or his heritage? He's the *best* person. I *love* him."

"Then you should tell your parents the truth," El said, her words quiet but certain. Mike and Max both looked at her in surprise.

"One of the things I don't understand about this world is racism. I don't understand how a skin tone can make someone more superior to the other. I know you want to protect Lucas, but you *shouldn't* have

to hide him away. I can be there when you tell them, if anything happens you know I have your back - "

"El no - "

"No Mike," El said turning to her boyfriend who had spoken up. She shook her head at him and a determined expression rose on her face. "I'm not having Lucas or Max in danger. And if it results in violence on Neil's part, then I want to make sure I'm there."

"Oh El," Max sighed looking between her courageous best friend and the nervous expression on Mike's face. "You can't fight *all* of our battles for us. Sometimes..." she took a deep breath, closing her eyes. "Sometimes we have to be strong too and stick up for what is right. Lucas should never have to feel ashamed. I will tell them, soon."

"I hate that word," El shuddered making Max laugh gently in confusion as Mike put his arm around his girlfriend giving her a comforting squeeze.

"Okay well, I *promise* I will tell them."

"Better," El relented, a relieved smile on her face.

Max sighed and looked between the couple. "So...what do I do next then?"

Mike and El glanced at each other, both of them smiling as they worked up a plan merely through thoughts alone. Max never understood how they managed to do that, have a connection so close it almost looked like they were reading each other's minds.

Whatever they had discussed had Max sitting on El's bed fifteen minutes later, Mike and El either side of her, encouraging her on as she nervously dialled Lucas's bedroom telephone number.

It was quickly picked up by her boyfriend who clearly recognised the number. "El! I'm so glad you called, listen Max and I had a fight. I *know* we always fight but this was different. I was really harsh, and I said things I didn't mean and - "

"Stalker?"

"Max?!"

Max bit into her lower lip trying to contain her smile, but unable to stop the racing of her heart at hearing Lucas's voice. "Yeah...um, it's me." She lifted her head and looked between Mike and El who both nodded their heads in unison, which only caused her to roll her eyes with how sickly sweet they were. Max closed her eyes and exhaled a long breath. "Listen, I'm sorry for being stupid."

"I'm sorry too," Lucas urged, the pain in his voice so evident that it made Max's chest feel tight.

Her eyes met with El's and she watched as her best friend gave her a nod of approval. "And...if you want to ask your parents if the offer of dinner is still available, then I'd like to take it."

"Really?" Lucas asked in surprise, a slight scepticism in his voice.

"Yes stalker," Max replied, rolling her eyes in amused frustration. "Just get them to choose a date and a time and I will be there, okay?"

"Yeah," Lucas smiled, his voice breathy and excited. "That's um, yeah that's totally tubular."

A laugh escaped Max's chest before she could reign it in and she shook her head in exasperation. "You realise that *still* no one says that?"

"Yeah, yeah," Lucas teased. His light and airy voice making the tightness in Max's chest immediately drift away. He was back to his happy and calm self, and that fact was more comforting than anything else.

"Well I best go stalker and let Mike and El get back to *studying*," Max teased earning a shove from Mike and a laugh from El.

"Yeah sure studying," Lucas goaded down the phone making Max grin ear to ear. A warmth was filling her chest and colour seeping into her cheeks. He made her so happy and it was moments like this, when the rest of the world seemed to just fall away, and it was only the two of them.

"I'll call you when I get home stalker," Max said quietly, cupping the end of the phone around her palm. "I love you."

"Oooh!" Mike teased, earning a kick to the shin from the disgruntled redhead.

"Yeah I'm guessing Mike paid for that one," Lucas chuckled before clearing his throat. "But I love you too Max. So much and I know we can get through anything."

Max couldn't help her smile, she knew she was bordering on Mike and El territory here, but it was practically contagious. "We can stalker, I promise. Speak to you later."

"Speak to you later babe."

Max disconnected the call and heaved a sigh, trying to avoid her friends' eyes for a moment as she grinned to herself, her heart finally happy again. She sat back up, a determination flickering in her blue eyes as she looked between the couple.

"What will I need to do for this dinner?"

"Dress up," El immediately replied, a flicker of excitement in her eyes at the opportunity of giving Max a makeover.

"And bring dessert over or something," Mike shrugged, scooting up the bed and leaning against the headboard.

"Dressing up and dessert, got you," Max nodded in agreement, her mind alive with all sorts of thoughts over what she would wear and how she would act in front of the Sinclair's.

"Wheeler?" Max asked as an afterthought when something occurred to her. "I've really got to make a dessert?"

"I mean, it would be kind of a good way to break the ice. That's what my mom does anyway."

"Oh, okay...cool." Max nodded. "So, what exactly *will* Karen be baking for me to pass off as my own creation?"

Mike and El laughed, Max grinning slightly, trying not to let the nerves or doubts get to her as she listened to the power couple recite their own tales of "meet the parents". Throughout she kept one thing in mind, that Max Mayfield *loved* Lucas Sinclair and neither racism or religion was going to keep them apart.

AN: Thank you so much for reading :-) Pretty please let me know what you thought of this first chapter, it would mean the world to me to get some feedback. We definitely don't get paid for our time on these stories, so a review would be like a payment ;-) I'm being too cheeky now, so I'm off! Haha

2. Changes

The Differences Between Us

AN: Hello strangers! It's been WAY to long since I wrote anything on The Differences Between Us, but I'm back with 9700 words for you! :-D I hope you enjoy this chapter, it kind of contains a little bit of everything. You'll see what I mean when you finish it XD

A special thanks to my amazing boyfriend for being my proof reader. Thank you babe!

Warning: Themes of racism and violence in the last section of the story.

Chapter 2 - Change

Summer 1987

The road out of Hawkins was quiet, the sun beat against the tarmac and the green leaves rustled in the slight summer breeze. It looked peaceful and serene until the distant sound of a roaring engine could be heard, breaking through the false image of Hawkins to the outside world.

The red ford mustang came into view and sped past, quick as a flash. The two girls inside the car laughed and sang their hearts out to Madonna, their hair wild and free as it was flung back by the momentum of the car.

"Open your heart to me, baby!" Max blasted out, her fingers tapping the steering wheel.

"I hold the lock and you hold the key!" El sang, her arms in the air as she allowed the music to flow through her. The smile on her face was one of happiness and calm, and though none of the party commented on it anymore, well except for Mike of course, it was the *best* look on El. Seeing her be happy, seeing her getting to taste freedom anytime they travelled filled them all with warmth.

As the song ended and the commercials started, El sighed, lowering her arms and looking around at the scenery as Max drove them towards the next town which had a large mall.

"So," El said shuffling slightly in her seat so that she was angled towards her best friend. "What exactly do you want to buy?"

Max took her eyes off the road for a second, glancing at El, before shrugging her shoulders and focusing back on the journey. "A dress maybe? I don't know...I've just got to look *nice* for the Sinclairs..."

El grinned, "Max you *always* look nice! You're cool."

Max exhaled a heavy breath, her shoulders rising and falling dramatically. "I know," she stated making El giggle. "But I need to look more...*feminine*. Like I can't be in converse and jeans. Jada always looks all pristine and perfect, I need her to know that I can be that too. For Lucas..."

El shook her head and sat straight again, watching the way the road twisted and turned.

"You confuse me sometimes."

"How?" Max laughed in surprise.

It was El's turn to shrug. "I thought you didn't care what people think of you."

"I *don't*. But Lucas's parents are different. I *want* them to think I'm good enough for Lucas."

"But you *are*!"

Max snorted, "trust me El, I'm not." There was a bitterness in her voice, a deep rooted insecurity that seeped into her mind. She would never be good enough for Lucas. He was such a good guy, and Max didn't know what to do with that. She was so used to being around men that belittled her, that made her defensive and unable to trust.

To be worthy of Lucas she needed to change. She needed to show his family that she could be respectable, polite and the type of girl they

were proud of their son dating.

Trying to ease the tension in the air, Max smiled and turned to look at El. "You can help me do a Sandy makeover, like in Grease. But this time, I'm going from sexy Sandy to sweet Sandy. Or maybe I'll channel Baby in Dirty Dancing..."

El laughed, shaking her head in amusement as she looked at Max. She sighed in defeat, leaning further into her seat. "You know Grease and Dirty Dancing are my weakness..."

Max grinned, her blue eyes sparkling as her attention stayed on the road. "That's the perk of being your best friend. Now...let's go give me a makeover."

El smiled, putting her sunglasses on.

"Let's do this."

The mall was bright and inviting, filled with young adults and teenagers who swarmed around the food court or stood around the movie listings, younger viewers plotting their means of sneaking into a rated movie. But to Max they were a source of frustration, as she attempted to weave around the large crowds, El right on her heels.

Perhaps she had got used to country living, but large places like the mall didn't hold appeal to her. She would rather be out in the open, breathing fresh air and impressing her friends with her skateboarding skills.

Max didn't *want* to be one of these girls, fawning over the mannequins wearing the latest fashion garments. Even the thought made her slightly nauseous. But she was on a mission, and if that required going into the lion's den, that Max was prepared to take that risk. Lucas was worth it, and though she didn't tell him enough, she loved that stalker.

"There," Max exhaled in a relieved breath, pointing out the Gap over the crowd of people queuing for Burger King. It was like a red beacon in the distance, willing the girls closer. Max grabbed a startled El's

hand and pushed through the crowd, ignoring the mutters and head shakes.

They rifled through racks of clothing, the hangers making metallic shrill squeaks as they pushed garment after garment along the railing. Max inspected each dress, skirt and sweater with narrowed scrutinising eyes, her stomach turning at the floral patterns and frills. She was a shorts and t-shirt kind of girl, the most patterned thing she owned was a shirt was strips.

Her eyes wandered to the other side of the Gap, *her* side where the denim and plain clothing lived. It practically whispered her name. Max shook her head, trying to refocus on finding something a lot more girly.

"Hey, what about this?" El asked pulling out a white floral dress with a bright neon pink belt and a skirt that stuck out on what Max thought was an awkward angle.

Max blinked staring between the dress and her best friend who had a playful glint in her eyes. She knew El was teasing her, clearly wanting her to see that there was no style that was going to suit her better than her *own* style.

But as Max glanced back at the gaudy dress, she exhaled sharply through her nostrils and closed her eyes tight for a moment. "I'll try it on," she practically whispered, not wanting anyone else to hear her words.

"Are you serious?" El giggled, her voice filled with surprised confusion.

Max kept her eyes closed as she nodded her head, resigned to her fate. She held her hand out for the dress, and only opened her eyes when the clothes hanger was firmly in her grasp.

El looked at her with wide eyes, her lips slightly parted. Max gulped and steered herself to the dressing room, El following her still in shock. She stayed silent as Max tried on the dress and walked out of the changing room to face her best friend who sat waiting, tapping her knee impatiently.

"What do you think?" Max asked, her voice unsteady as she slowly turned to look at the large mirror, cringing as she saw herself. All dressed up like a doll.

El stood up and moved closer, her eyebrows low and concerned as her hazel eyes flickered over the dress. "There's nothing *wrong* with it. You just don't look like yourself."

Max stared at herself, her eyes taking in the puffiness of the dress, her fingers brushing across the beading on the floral design. She heaved a heavy sigh, her shoulders falling sharply as she looked straight into the mirror, her jaw tightening.

"Good," she responded.

Max cursed as she stumbled out of her beloved mustang, almost falling over in her heels and trapping her dress in the car door. "What am I meant to do with all this netting," she hissed to herself, smoothing the skirt back down.

She rolled her eyes in frustration and looked up at the Wheeler house, her whole body tense. She knew Mike was never going to let her live this down.

Max had allowed El to do her makeup and hair ready for dinner, and while her best friend had done a great job with adding a 1950's style wave to Max's hair, allowing it to curve slightly as it was all brushed to one side, it was the makeup that really stood out.

Max supposed it was because she didn't really *wear* makeup, but the lipstick seemed too bright and her eyes too bold. Her face felt heavy with it, and all she wanted to do was rush straight into the bathroom and scrub it all off.

Instead she carefully stepped on the tarmac drive of the Wheeler house, slowly making her way up the front door in her heels, with her arms slightly out to try and keep her balance. Max couldn't help but hope that she would actually fall and break her ankle, the pain of her bone breaking sounded more appealing than the dinner she would have to endure.

Before she could even think about getting to the Sinclair house, which frustratingly enough was next door, she had to pick up Karen's dessert, one that she would of course be taking credit for.

Max pressed her finger on the doorbell, keeping the button down longer than would be deemed necessary, but it was important she got this embarrassment out of the way before she could move onto the next embarrassment.

The sound of the lock being scraped back could be heard and Max shuffled on her feet, the pink high heeled shoes she wore already making her ankles ache.

The door opened and Max came face to face with Ted Wheeler. *Great.*

"Is Mike around?" she asked, getting straight to the point.

Ted watched her for a moment, "Yes Michael is in. And you are?"

Max rolled her eyes, huffing a breath through her nose. She didn't have time for this, she wasn't exactly best pals with Ted Wheeler, but surely he had noticed her existence for the last three years? There had been group sleepovers and barbeques at the Wheeler house, and yet he couldn't even recognise her?

She narrowed her blue eyes at the middle aged man, "it's Max. El's best friend? Lucas's girlfriend? Pain in the arse to your son Michael Edward Wheeler?"

Ted blinked rapidly, "Maxine Mayfield?" he said, surprise evident in his lined face. He looked at her outfit in confusion, "But what happened to you?"

Max clenched her fists, "First of all it's *Max*. Second of all, nothing *happened* to me okay?!" She felt like her voice was becoming shrill and some of her suppressed emotions bubbled to the surface. "I'm wearing the worlds *stupidest* dress and look like this because I'm trying to impress the Sinclairs! I'm doing this because I love my boyfriend and he needs to know I would never be ashamed of him, that *I'm* the one that needs to change. And yes the heels are killing me, and yes I will be burning them after tonight. So if you could

please just call your son or Karen, or dammit even Holly so I can have a grown up conversation and pick up my *damn pie!*"

Max was shaking, her fists still clenched and her breaths heavy as she raised and dropped her shoulders with every inhale and exhale.

Ted continued to stare at her, his usual monotone expression across his face. "I am confused," he muttered quietly before turning towards the hallway where there was the sound of footsteps. "Ah Michael, one of your little friends is here."

"Jesus Max," Mike huffed coming into view, the covered apple pie in his hands. "I could hear you from the basement. What's - " He froze when he caught sight of the red head. She was practically blazing, stood in the doorway, her hands on her hips and tapping her heeled foot impatiently.

Mike's eyes went across her frilly dress, her makeup and her general look. He snorted, trying to control himself from laughing, his face a picture as his lips wobbled in an attempt not to smile too widely.

"You look *different*," Mike said, his voice just as shaky as he continued his fight against laughter.

Max rolled her eyes and held out her hands for the pie, "Save me the sympathy Wheeler and hand over the pie."

Mike sniggered and did as he was told, Max sighing in relief when she finally had her hands on the dessert. "Thank Karen for me," she said, genuine gratitude in her voice because the pie looked just as amazing as any other baked goods from Mrs Wheeler.

"Will do," Mike smirked, crossing his arms and leaning against the door frame. "It's apple by the way. In case the Sinclair's ask."

"Thanks," Max exhaled, feeling exhausted already as her blue eyes flickered over to the Sinclair house. "I best get going then," she said, her voice weak as she continued to stare at the blue house.

She didn't realise she was still stood in the same place, or that Ted was exchanging a look with Mike. "This has been fun and all," Mr Wheeler finally sighed, "but I have to get back to my show."

Mike watched his father leave, rolling his eyes before turning back to Max who was almost in a trance staring at the Sinclair house. A smile of empathy lifted his lips as he said "They don't bite you know."

Max blinked looking back at Mike, surprising him by the vulnerability in her eyes. For the first time he didn't feel like teasing her. He glanced at her shoes and cringed, imagining how uncomfortable they must be. He wondered what El would want him to do and grinned, stepping outside and closing the front door behind him.

"Come on," Mike laughed holding out his arm for a confused Max who merely stared at it. "Let me escort you to the Sinclair house so you don't fall on your ass and ruin the pie."

Max looked up at Mike and then to the pie which she held firmly in her grip. She eventually sighed and looped her arm with his. "I'm only doing this to protect the pie," she explained while Mike snorted with amusement, shaking his head as he led Max towards the Sinclair house.

He merely nodded, when a muttered, "Thanks Wheeler," came out of the redhead's mouth but couldn't help the wide grin that curved his lips when she added, "I'll put in a good word to El."

Lucas paced nervously across his room, cursing under his breath as he attempted to fix his tie. His fingers fumbled over the satin material and he exhaled a sharp breath through his nostrils, his mouth in a tight frown as he worked.

"Why don't you get *mom* to do that for you Lukey?" called the condescendingly sweet voice of Erica as she sauntered into the room and jumped onto her brothers bed, scattering the pillows he had just neatened up.

Lucas spared a moment to glare at his little sister before continuing to focus on his tie. "I can do it myself," he said through gritted teeth.

"And you're doing a *great* job," Erica said with a sarcastic smile and a thumbs up.

"Bite me."

"No thanks," Erica snorted, "you probably have rabies."

Lucas huffed an angry breath and looked up at his sister. "Look, is there a reason for you to be in *my* room? Because I really don't have time for this and Max is going to be here *any minute*."

Erica rolled her eyes getting up from the bed, "I don't even know *why* you are so nervous. Max is like the only cool one of your nerd friends."

Lucas closed his eyes for a moment, trying to calm his breathing and not shout at his sister. This wasn't the time to be grounded. Erica wouldn't understand why tonight was so important. How it had taken Max three years to be ready for this dinner. A dinner where she would actually interact with his parents as his girlfriend and he could sit there, smiling and proud to call her his.

But of course he was nervous. He wanted Max to feel comfortable and he knew she wouldn't exactly be dressing up, but he felt it was important to look good for her. He also couldn't deny that he was wearing the clothes his mom had laid out for him, so he kind of had to impress her too.

"This dinner is important okay?" Lucas sighed, looking at his sister who merely frowned, looking at him in confusion. "You'll understand when you're older."

Erica smirked, "I don't *need* to be older to understand that boys are weird."

Lucas smiled despite himself, "Good. So stay away from them."

Before Erica could come back with a sarcastic comment the doorbell rang, making the siblings both look towards the bedroom door and hear their mother's shout of "Lucas! Erica! Come downstairs!"

Lucas gulped quietly, his eyes on the bedroom door and his hands frozen on his tie. She was here. *Shit*.

"Maybe I don't need the tie," he mumbled, pulling it from his shirt,

not caring where it landed on his bedroom floor. Erica rolled her eyes but had the temporary grace not to say anything as she led the way out of the bedroom and to the stairs.

Lucas ran a hand over his hair, trying to push it down as he nervously descended the stairs, hearing his girlfriend's voice.

"Thank you for having me for dinner Mrs Sinclair," Max said in a sweet voice, making Lucas frown. Her soft tone didn't *sound* like his fiery girlfriend but he could only assume she was trying to be polite.

"Oh please honey it's *Jada*, we are just happy we can have dinner with you and get to know you a little better."

"I look forward to it," Max replied, Lucas could practically hear her fake smile in the air. He felt for his girlfriend but wasn't prepared for who would greet him as he finally made it to the bottom of the stairs and saw his mother stood just inside of the lounge with a girl he barely recognised.

If it wasn't for her blue eyes Lucas wouldn't have known it was Max. She was wearing a dress, one that he didn't think he would see within 10 feet of her. Her cute freckles were covered by heavy make-up and her hair, although looking beautiful, appeared a bit too controlled and in place for wild and free Max.

Lucas was frozen on the spot, staring at his girlfriend, an expression of complete confusion covering his usually calm features. She looked beautiful, of course she did, this was Max after all. But she didn't look like herself, she was trying to be someone else and sadly Lucas knew why.

"*Oh my god*," Erica whispered, her mouth gaping open as she looked at Max before shaking her head in disapproval and wandering off with a mumbled, "thought she was cool" under her breath.

Lucas would have kicked her if it wasn't for Max turning to look at him, a nervous smile on her face. He faltered, unable to not smile back, because dammit she *was* beautiful and she was trying so hard. But she needed to realise that she didn't *need* to try. He was in love with her and she was already perfect to him.

"Hi," Max said, her voice slightly shaky as she smiled at Lucas, her eyes flickering to his mom as she hovered, clearly feeling like she couldn't come up to him.

"Hey," Lucas replied in a breathy voice, smiling nervously. "You look beautiful," he said clearing his throat.

"Thank you," Max smiled, a look of relief so evident in her face.

Jada looked between the couple with a satisfied smile and tapped Max gently on the arm to get her attention. "I'll call you to dinner in a moment honey, Charles is just putting the finishing touches to the stroganoff. Thank you so much for the apple pie."

Lucas frowned in confusion, his gaze moving to the pie that his mother held. He reframed from rolling his eyes, that was clearly a Mrs Wheeler dish.

"You're very welcome. I look forward to the stroganoff, it sounds delightful," Max said, a wide and friendly smile on her face and a brightness in her voice. With how she held herself, she was the epitome of a preppy, goody two shoes while Lucas knew that wasn't Max *at all*. She gagged at those types of girls, all fake like Stacey and her group of clones.

Lucas and Max watched Jada walk away towards the kitchen, pie securely in her grip, asking her husband if he needed help before the sound of cupboards closing and opening could be heard.

Lucas exhaled a relieved breath and grabbed Max's hand, startling her slightly as he pulled her into the hallway. She almost tripped on the heels she wore, and cursed under her breath as she rubbed at her ankle.

"What are you playing at stalker?" she whispered, irritation in her voice as she adjusted her heels and tried to hide the cringe in her face at how uncomfortable she clearly was.

"What am *I* playing at?!" Lucas laughed, his eyebrows raised in shock. He pointed to her outfit and shook his head, "Max, this isn't you. You didn't have to dress up for my parents, for *me*."

Max looked down at her outfit and huffed out an exasperated breath. "Do you not think I look good? That I don't look respectful now?"

"Of course you do Max," Lucas whispered, feeling just as frustrated as his girlfriend. "You look beautiful babe, but you don't need to wear a *dress* or that make-up to look beautiful. It's what is underneath that counts."

Max arched her eyebrows and crossed her arms in an accusatory manner while Lucas splurged for words, realising what he had just said and how it might have been construed.

"I-I don't mean like under your *clothes*! I mean inside you know?" Lucas hurried to say, his cheeks blazing red. When Max tilted her head, he quickly added, "n-not that what is under your clothes *isn't* beautiful. Because it is! Your body is *beautiful*!"

There was a loud clearing of a throat making both Lucas and Max startle. Thankfully it was Erica, standing on the stairs just above them, her arms crossed as she shook her head in disapproval, a smirk on her lips.

"You two are gross. And I don't think you want mom and dad to hear about Max's *body* Lukey," Erica said, a mischievous glint in her eyes.

Lucas's nostrils flared as he glared at his sister, "how much do you want?"

Erica shrugged, "your months allowance should cover my silence."

"Fine," Lucas hissed, feeling the heat of anger rolling off his skin as Erica sauntered past with a pleased smile on her face. He watched her go, his eyes narrowed while Max was staring at him, her chest heaving.

"You see? That's *why* I need to change," she whispered harshly. "You are having to pay off your sister because you're *ashamed* of me."

"What?!" Lucas choked out, bewildered by Max's reaction. "Do you really *want* her to go tell my parents that we've had sex? You *know* my family is religious, it won't go down well. I'm trying to protect us both!"

Max closed her eyes and shook her head, her jaw tight. "*Of course* I don't want you to tell them that," she whispered, her voice pained. It made Lucas soften, worry burrowing his brow as he stared at her.

She opened her eyes and looked back at him, vulnerability in her gaze. "If I act more like the type of girl they want you to be with, then maybe you won't have to worry about hiding things? Maybe we will be so damn *good* that there will be nothing *to* hide."

"Max that's - "

"Dinners ready!" Jada called breaking through Lucas's words and pulling Max away from him. She plastered that fake smile on her face and walked straight to the dining room. Her loud, "wow! This looks *wonderful* Mr and Mrs Sinclair!" going through Lucas like ice. He closed his eyes tight and took some calming breaths.

This was going to be a *long* dinner.

"So Max, where will you be applying to college?" Jada asked, carefully serving out the beef stroganoff and tagliatelle pasta.

"Well I am aiming to get into an ivy league school, such as Harvard or Brown."

Lucas choked up on his pasta and mumbled an apology when his parents, Erica and Max shot him a glance. He cleared his throat, reaching for his water glass, his eyes on his girlfriend wondering what she was thinking.

Max was smart, but he knew she didn't even *have* plans for college. At least not yet. He knew she wanted to get back to California but she wasn't sure on a major or if she wanted to pump that much money into something that might not make her happy.

Lucas gently nudged her foot under the table, hoping she would backtrack and tell the truth, but the only acknowledgement she made of their foot contact was to sit up a little straighter and to tell his parents how beautiful the food was. At least *that* wasn't a lie.

The meal carried on for a little while, his parents taking the heat off

Max and asking their children what they had been doing this past week of the summer. Jada and Charles Sinclair both worked full time, so it was usually around the dinner table when they spent their bonding time.

"I'm still going around with my resume," Lucas said, twirling his pasta around his fork. There was a slight bitterness to his voice that he couldn't hide. One that his parents were used to, because they had once had the same bitterness. It wasn't uncommon for Lucas to be more suited to a job and yet still lose out to someone else, someone of a different skin colour.

The world may be becoming more modern, but Lucas and his family weren't free of prejudice and racism, especially in a small town. He knew he stuck out and it was something that hadn't bothered him too much, that was until he tried to find work. He wasn't any different to the other candidates, except for the fact that he would work ten times harder and yet he was *always* overshadowed.

"Something will come up son," Charles encouraged, a sympathetic smile on his face.

There was a gentle squeeze on his hand and Lucas looked down to see Max's palm covering his skin, her thumb caressing along his thumb for a moment, it was comforting and as he looked up at his girlfriend they shared a genuine smile. His chest felt heavy with the love he felt for her. Those incredible blue eyes had always been accepting of him.

"Well I'm not getting to let some *dumb* old man tell me if *I'm* good enough or not," Erica said loudly, holding her water and looking around the table.

"Is that right honey?" Jada asked with an amused smile as she lifted her fork.

"Uh huh," Erica nodded, her lips pouted with determination. "I'm going to be president someday. You can't spell America without Erica."

Lucas burst out laughing, not stopping even when his smiling parents

told him to settle down. Max bit her lip trying to contain her own smile, clearly torn between pleasing his family and being herself.

"And you call me and my friends nerds?"

"It's not nerdy to be president," Erica shrugged, attitude in her face as she glared at her brother. "It's the most powerful position in our country and *you* better treat me better *Lukey* or I could have you killed."

"Erica!" Jada and Charles warned.

"What?!" their daughter replied, genuinely confused by what she could have possibly said that was considered inappropriate.

"No talks of killing your brother," Charles said, his warm and deep voice unable to hide his amusement as he cut up his beef.

"Especially not at the dinner table," Jada said before looking towards Max, "and *especially* not in front of our guest! Max I'm sorry."

"It's fine," the redhead smiled, waving off the incident casually. She looked at Erica and grinned, "and as a matter of fact, I think you would be a great president Erica."

"Thanks Max," Lucas's little sister smirked, grinning to herself as she twirled her pasta while her brother looked between the pair feeling betrayed.

"So you want her to kill me then?" Lucas asked Max.

She shrugged, smiling as she reached for her water. Just as she was sipping at the glass she whispered teasingly, "sometimes sacrifices have to be made..."

Lucas couldn't help but snort with laughter, his face lifting with happiness as he saw a flicker of Max returning. The powerful, strong, sarcastic and playful Max was still there, just underneath this barbie doll exterior.

For the first time Lucas wondered if this dinner did have the potential to actually go well. Max was slowly softening back to her usual self,

her guard not as strong as it had been when she entered the house. Was it so hard to believe that maybe she realised that his parents weren't so scary after all?

"So Max which church do you go to?"

His mother's question was like a vinyl scratching and Lucas cringed, closing his eyes for a moment and wondering what Max was going to say. Would she tell them that she was an atheist?

"Oh um, I go to church on 34th street."

Lucas sighed quietly, so she was going down the lying road.

"Ah yes," Jada nodded, her glass of wine in hand. There was a slight hardness to her face, "we did try that church when we first moved here. I wouldn't say it was the most welcoming to us. Our church is the word of love gospel centre just outside of Hawkins, they are truly wonderful."

"Amen," Charles agreed, his voice quiet but powerful.

"Oh okay," Max nodded. "Yeah I've heard of it."

Lucas rolled his eyes, thankful that he had finished his meal so that he didn't have to continue feeling like his stomach was turning, his food sloshing around his tummy like a washing machine.

His mother wasn't making things easier for Lucas as she placed her wine glass back down onto the starch white table cloth and smiled as she looked between the young couple. That smile spelt danger for Lucas.

"Well Lucas has of course been brought up in a Christian household, and we expect him to act in God's good grace and treat others with respect. Does he treat you with respect Max?"

"*Mom* - " Lucas groaned covering his face with his hands while Jada shushed him and waited for Max's answer.

But to Lucas's surprise, his mom didn't have to wait long for a reply. Almost immediately Max nodded her head, "yes, he has always

treated me with respect. Your son is a gentleman, I think you would be very proud of how he treats women. And not just myself, but his friends, like El for instance."

Lucas slowly lowered his hands and looked at his girlfriend in surprise, blinking his chocolate brown eyes for a moment before a grateful smile curved his lips. He was incredibly thankful for his girlfriend's words, and in that moment he couldn't take his eyes off her, even when his parents complimented him for being the gentleman they hoped to raise.

Once they were all finished eating, Charles and Jada started to gather the plates, insisting to Max they didn't need help when she offered.

"We're looking forward to this pie though," Charles grinned, sniffing the air as if he could smell the sweet pastry and packed filling.

"It's apple," Max added, nerves flickering back into her voice, making her slightly breathless.

"Ooh has it got cinnamon in it?" Jada asked as she lifted the plates from the table.

Max anxiously glanced at Lucas who didn't know how to respond before she looked back at his mother, a sheen appearing on her forehead as if she was about to start sweating. "Um...yeah?"

"Oh good," Jada replied with a content smile. "I love cinnamon."

"We'll call you when dessert is ready kids," Charles added, helping his wife with the dirty dishes as they walked into the kitchen.

"That means I've got *at least* fifteen minutes to call Tina and tell her about the shambles that was this dinner," Erica chuckled, her laugh sarcastic and gleeful as she pushed away from the dinner table and wandered to her bedroom.

Lucas watched Erica go, his eyes narrowed. His parents once told him that one day he would love his sister, yeah he was still waiting for that day.

"Was it really that bad?" Max mumbled, her voice heavy with worry.

Lucas turned to look at her, all anger at Erica leaving his face. He *hated* seeing Max this vulnerable and he would do anything to stop it.

"No," he told her gently, smiling slightly, "it wasn't bad at all." When Max gave him a feeble grin Lucas sighed, taking her hand in his and standing up. "Come on, let's go to my room and talk."

"Okay," Max said slowly, her brow lowering in suspicion as her boyfriend led the way to the stairs. They ascended the steps together, the wood underneath the heavy carpets making slight creeks every now and then.

Lucas closed his bedroom door while Max hesitated, unsure where to place herself before she slowly lowered herself onto the edge of her boyfriend's bed, her sharp blue eyes watching him as he turned around to face her.

Lucas looked at Max, at the heavy makeup, at the dress, at the heels and how her ankles looked red. He thought about everything she had said that night and *why* she had said those things. Why she would want to change herself so drastically. It had to come to a stop.

Lucas exhaled a heavy breath and closed the gap between him and Max, kneeling down in front of her so that they were eye level. She blinked, confused about what he was doing as he carefully cupped her cheeks in his warm hands and kissed her, gentle and loving.

Max kissed him back, her fingernails brushing against the coarseness of his hair. For a moment they stayed like that, exchanging breathy kisses, Lucas's body warming up as he allowed himself to fall deeper in love with the fiery redhead, the most complex and beautiful girl he had ever met.

Finally Lucas broke the kiss, knowing what he wanted to say. He continued to stroke Max's cheeks and he stared into her wide ocean blue eyes as the words flowed out of him. "I don't care if you want to wear jeans and a shirt to dinner Max, I don't care if you want to go to college or not, I don't care if you don't go to church and I don't care if you can't cook to save your life."

Max choked out a laugh, her eyes watery as she continued to stare at

her boyfriend, seeing the determined in his voice, the conviction in his stare and delicateness in how he touched her.

"I want *you* Max Mayfield. I want the girl who doesn't go to church, I want the girl who can't cook because dammit I can and I will make you anything and teach you if that's what you want. I want the free spirit girl, I want the smart girl who doesn't want to go to college because she isn't sure what she wants to do and doesn't want to waste money. Max that *is* smart."

"I want the girl who challenges me, the girl with passion, the girl who sticks her fingers up to the world and follows her own path, not the one that she is meant to follow. Max," Lucas pleaded, looking into her startled eyes, seeing the truth starting to comprehend. "I want *you* for who you are. I want Max Mayfield for who she is. That's the girl I fell in love with and that's the girl I'm going to continue to love to the day I *die*."

Tears had slipped down Max's face as she listened to Lucas, taking in the weight of every single heartfelt word. She gasped, trying to calm her breathing, her mascara running as it swirled black lines down her face.

"You're so dramatic," Max teased through a choked voice, heavy with emotion.

Lucas couldn't help but grin, happiness and relief filling his chest as he knew he had got through to his girl. "You know it," he replied, his smiling only widening.

Max shuddered a shaky breath, closing her eyes and allowing the tears that had gathered at her wet lashes to slip down her cheeks. When she opened her eyes, she stared right back at Lucas, her fingers moving through his hair for a moment as her lips began to curve into a smile.

"I love you," she whispered. "I know I don't say it enough. But I love you Lucas, you are the *best* thing that ever happened to me and you always will be."

Lucas beamed, he could practically feel the light sparkling around

him as he leaned in and kissed Max, more passionately this time, his elated energy coursing through the kiss. When they finally broke apart, they rested their foreheads together and stared into each others eyes. Even with her make up running, Max was still the most beautiful girl in the world.

"I love you Max for who you are. Please don't ever change, this world will be a much more boring place if you do."

Max laughed, sniffing as she shook her head. "I won't. I promise."

Lucas grinned, "Good. Because friends don't lie, that's - "

"A party rule, I know."

"Woah, you actually *were* listening during your initiation!"

"Stalker this is becoming an annoying conversation now."

"Fine," Lucas grinned looking at his irritated girlfriend. "It's good to have Max back."

She looked at him, smiling despite herself. "I agree. But can you just help me with one thing?"

"Anything," Lucas responded seriously, his eyebrows curved low in determination.

"Help me get this makeup off and find me a pair of shoes that aren't these ankle killers?"

Lucas grinned, "anything for you Mad Max."

Max felt nerves swirling in her stomach as she slowly descended the stairs, Lucas leading the way. Her face was clean of makeup and her bare feet pressed into the thick carpet, she could barely *feel* her feet following the murdering pink heeled shoes, but she was thankful for the freedom, her toes wiggling slightly as they came back to life.

She had washed her face free of make up, her freckles now standing out proudly, and she had taken off the clinching pink belt, one of

Lucas's sweaters thrown over the dress that she wore. Her fingers tugged at the sleeves for comfort as she walked back into the dinning room.

Lucas's parents were busy with the pie, Jada cutting it up into perfect pieces while Charles brought in a pouring jug full of thick cream and a tub of vanilla ice cream under his arm.

"This looks *wonderful* Max," Jada exclaimed as she looked up, hearing her son and his girlfriend approaching but pausing slightly at Max's altered appearance. Charles noticing the silence looked up too, his eyebrows raising slightly in surprise.

Max gulped, her heart was racing with adrenaline. It was now or never.

"I didn't make the pie," Max stated, her voice slightly shaky as she looked at Jada and Charles. Lucas stood by her side, his hand knocking against hers before their fingers entwined, both of them a united front.

Max took a deep breath, trying to calm her nerves before she continued. "Mrs Wheeler made the pie for me, I'm sorry for taking credit. I just...I just wanted to impress you."

Jada and Charles blinked looking at one another before looking back at Max. There was nothing standoffish about their glances, they merely seemed confused. "Honey you didn't have to feel like you had to make a *pie* to impress us," Jada said with an amused smile.

Max shook her head, her heart in her throat. She felt Lucas's gentle squeeze of her hand and she found the strength to carry on speaking, to confess. "I know, but it's not just that. I'm sorry but I *don't* go to church. I don't know where I want to go to college, I definitely wouldn't have the grades for an Ivy League school even if I *did* know where I wanted to go. I just... I *wanted* for you to think I was good enough for your son."

Max could feel herself shaking, she could feel the waver in her voice and she bit down on her cheek, willing herself not to cry. There was only a few moments in her life when she had felt truly scared, and

this was one of them. Not because she feared there would be violence, no, Max feared that the Sinclair's would tell their son to break up with her. She couldn't lose him, that was what this whole dinner had been about and she had ruined it.

"I'm sorry," Max gasped. "I'm sorry for lying to you, I'm sorry for ruining your dinner. I think it's best if I - "

"Max," Jada interrupted the teenage girl's despairing rant, her hand held out to stop the red head. "Let's all just sit down."

Lucas and Max shared a glance but hesitantly stepped forward and took their seats opposite Charles and Jada.

Max bit her lip wondering what they were going to say, her eyes flickering between the couple apprehensively. To her surprise they seemed calm, and when Jada pushed a plate of apple pie towards Max and then once towards Lucas, the teenagers could barely hide their confusion.

"Ice cream or cream?" Charles asked Max, a kind smile on his face.

Max felt slightly startled as she looked at both options, "um...ice cream please..."

She watched as Mr Sinclair scooped vanilla ice cream onto her plate and then asked his son the same question. Lucas looked just as confused as he responded cream and shuffled in his seat, clearly wondering if his parents had gone crazy.

"Tuck in," Jada encouraged before pressing her spoon into the pie, the metal cutting cleanly through the sweet pastry.

Max shared a glance with Lucas, his eyes were wide, and his brow creased. Once he shrugged and picked up his spoon, Max copied, her gaze on her pie, but her mind running at full capacity, wondering what on earth was going on. This wasn't the typical reaction to finding out that your son's daughter was a lying atheist who didn't care for the idea of college.

There was silence for a while, only interrupted when Erica hurried downstairs to grab a piece of pie before immediately running straight

back upstairs insisting that she just *had* to finish her conversation with Tina.

"That girl," Jada grinned, shaking her head as she poured more cream onto her plate.

"She gets it from you," Charles teased, making his wife chuckle softly. His gaze flickered to Max and his wife nodded at him, urging him on. "You know Max, when I was your age I was in a band."

Max blinked, looking up from her dessert to Lucas's father, who was looking relaxed, lounging comfortable with his arm draped around the back of Jada's chair.

"You were dad?" Lucas asked in surprise, looking between his parents as if waiting for them to laugh and say they were joking.

"I was son. A motown group with my friends, we formed it in high school and performed a bit when in college."

"I was his groupie," Jada murmured with a smile, her cup of coffee against her lips. "My family did not approve."

"They didn't?" Max couldn't help but ask, her breath baited slightly as she watched the couple. "What happened?"

Jada put down her cup of coffee and smiled at Max, "they didn't think I should be with Charles, they thought he had no ambition, no *real* prospects. Of course I knew better, and I was right."

"You're always right honey," Charles added with a wink, making Jada smirk.

"And how did you prove them wrong?" Max whispered, her words filled with desperation, *needing* to know what she had to do to prove her worth.

"Well the more they got to know Charles their opinions soon changed. I had always told them not to judge a book by a cover. Surely it was no different from how we were judged by the colour of our skin."

Max swallowed slowly, looking between the couple. She understood what they were saying and *why* they had brought up their story. "I'm sorry for thinking that you would judge me."

Jada smiled reaching across the table to squeeze Max's hand. "It's okay honey, you just need to know that we never would. Life is about making mistakes and learning from them. Be who you are, and be *proud* of it."

Charles nodded, "you don't have to go to college or church to make us happy Max, although our church is always open to you of course. As long as you make our son happy and he makes you happy, *we* are happy."

"Thank you," Max replied through her dry throat, feeling slightly in awe as she tried to smile at the couple. Their words seemed to break through her barricade and before she could stop herself she exhaled a breath and spoke. "Lucas does make me happy. When I came here from California I didn't have anyone. Billy and my step father Neil aren't good people and my mom...well, she seems to be cut off from it all. Like she doesn't *see* how they behave, or hear the bad things they say."

Lucas and his parents all remained quiet, allowing Max this moment to get her thoughts off her heavily burdened shoulders.

"They are racist. They are *horrible* people and I hate it. I never want to subject Lucas to it, I don't want to be in that situation. It's hard to study there, it's hard to even live in that house and be in *proximity* to such small minded people." Max closed her eyes for a moment, "and that's *why* I don't have any plans after school except to go to California. To be near my dad and the ocean again. To live somewhere where the people are more accepting and where there is diversity."

Max sighed reaching for her glass of water, "sorry," she mumbled. "I probably shouldn't have said all of that."

"It's fine," Charles responded with an understanding smile. "We appreciate that you don't want Lucas in that type of situation with your family. But I'm sure we have raised him to stick up for himself if

needed."

"Yes sir," Lucas added before reaching for Max's hand and pulling his girlfriend's attention towards him. "And you're worth it Max. You need to know that."

"And if things ever get too hard over there honey, you can stay here." Jada said kindly before quickly adding, "in the spare bedroom of course. But you are always welcome."

Max felt overwhelmed with emotion, emotion that she had never truly understood until this moment. Gratitude. True and pure gratitude. She looked at Lucas's parents and no longer saw two people to fear, two people to try and impress. She saw them for who they were, Jada and Charles Sinclair, a truly wonderful couple. A couple she would get to know even more as the years went by, a couple who she had no doubt would become her in laws some day.

"Thank you," she said with strength. "I really am so grateful. Thank you for accepting me and for understanding."

"Any time honey." Jada smiled, before tucking into the last of her pie. She hummed in appreciation and grinned, "this truly is a wonderful pie Max."

Max snorted, finally cutting into her apple pie and scooping the ice cream that had partially melted. "Thank you, I made it myself."

Lucas chuckled first, a short burst that was followed by warm laughter from Max and his parents. They all smiled, joking and teasing as they carried on eating. Max became engaged into the conversation, explaining *why* she nicknamed their son stalker considering how he would follow her around when she first moved to Hawkins.

"You needed to be more slick than that son," Charles chuckled when Max explained about Lucas watching her from the other side of the school playground.

"I genuinely thought we were well hidden!" Lucas exclaimed, causing more laughter in the dining room.

Max couldn't stop smiling as she looked between her boyfriend and his parents. This was what it felt like, this was what it was all about. *Family*. And for at least this moment, Max felt like she had it.

Max drove home in a borrowed pair of Jada's sneakers, relieved that she could feel her feet again as she pressed down on the pedal, her hair escaping from its tight hair spray hold as cold air rushed across her face.

The dinner was *nothing* like she had expected, and even the thought of explaining the whole thing to El tonight on the phone as planned sounded exhausting. It had been a rollercoaster ride, one that Max had never felt ready for and yet she couldn't regret it. She felt braver and a truer version of herself than she had ever realised.

She smiled to herself, knowing that she had a home at the Sinclair's. If that meant studying with Lucas in his bedroom, staying the night or even just having dinner with the family. She was allowed to be there, she was *accepted* and that feeling meant more to her than anything else.

She inhaled a long breath of fresh air and smiled, sighing slightly as she drove down the straight roads of Hawkins closer to home. The first thing she would do when she got home was take a bath, soak her feet, get into pyjamas and then phone El with all of the gossip. She knew her best friend would be apprehensive, waiting for all the details.

Max also made a mental note to tell El off for the pink heels. Her blue eyes narrowed as she glanced at the heels slung on the passenger seat. Yeah, they had been *murder* and Max looked forward to burning them to ash in the back yard.

It was getting late now, the only lights beaming from the mustang and the street lights as Max turned onto her road, seeing the house in the distance. She noticed the two cars in the drive and groaned in disappointment. Neil was back from his business trip.

Max tightened her jaw and huffed in determination, she wasn't going to let this phase her or ruin her plans for the evening. She pulled up

to the house, grabbing her stuff and locking the car, whispering good night to her beloved mustang before walking quietly up to the house.

She could hear the sound of the television as she opened the porch door and locked it behind her. The volume was pushed down slightly as Susan Hargrove called, "Max is that you?!"

"Yeah mom," Max replied, her voice tired as she stepped into the living room, her eyes immediately going to her mom and Neil who were sat down together watching the news channel. Neil didn't say anything, barely acknowledging her existence as he took the remote control off his wife and turned the volume back up.

Susan looked up and down at her daughter noticing the dress. "You look nice darling, have you been anywhere nice?"

Max was about to go for her default answer of "out with El" when she faltered, her lips barely open as she changed her mind. She thought about everything that had happened that night, how even after *lying* to the Sinclairs they had still accepted her. They were good and honest people and Max was sick of pretending.

"Yeah I've been somewhere nice. I had dinner with my boyfriend Lucas and his parents."

No one spoke for a moment, the only sound coming from the television where a perfect young blonde woman told them the weather report, her smile just as false as her boobs.

Susan blinked in confusion and Neil finally told his cold eyes onto the teenage girl. "You have a boyfriend?" her mother asked, sounding hurt. "Lucas you said?"

"Yes," Max said, standing up as straight as she could, her heart starting to beat just a little faster. "Lucas Sinclair. I met his parents properly tonight, they were awesome."

Neil picked up the remote control and within a second the television was off, making Max's heart beat sound louder and louder.

"Sinclairs," Neil said quietly, his tone sharp. His eyes calculating as he stared at Max. "Wait a minute...aren't they bl - "

"Black?" Max responded, her voice louder than before as her blood began to warm up. "Yes. Although I don't see why that even matters."

"Of course it *matters*!" Neil spat, as he stood up facing Max who didn't falter as she stared back at him, her eyes narrowing.

"Neil," Susan whispered feebly, still sat as she looked nervously between her daughter and her husband.

Max wasn't backing down, she had had enough of hiding. No more.

"Maybe it matters to a racist like you Neil. But it doesn't matter to me. And it never will."

Neil was seething, his eyes livid as he advanced towards Max. "You really think I am going to let my daughter go running around with some nig - "

"Don't you *ever* use that word!" Max screamed, her fury matching Neil's. "And don't you *ever* call me *your* daughter. I love Lucas and I've been with him *three years*, yes mom three years," Max added as Susan gasped in surprise.

She looked at her mother, the woman who wasn't sticking up for her, the woman who continued to sit back and allow her husband to treat not only Max like shit, but *wonderful* people.

"But you don't have to worry about us embarrassing you, because the first chance we get, we'll be going to California."

"You are not going anywhere with that nig -"

Max didn't allow Neil to finish his word before she slapped him. The smack responded in the room and Susan screamed as Neil threw back his fist and slammed it into Max's cheek, making her fall to the ground.

"Neil *stop*!" Susan shrieked, finally getting to her feet as Neil grabbed Max by the material of Lucas's sweater and picked her up off the floor, slamming her back into the wall.

"Don't you *ever* disrespect me in this house!" he screamed at Max, his

spit hitting her face. "This is *my* house!"

Max took her chance, and kicked Neil straight in the balls as hard as she could, he crouched, howling in pain. "Don't you ever touch me again you piece of shit!" She shouted, her voice hoarse and her cheek stinging and wet. "Did you forget who my best friend's father is? Yeah, the *Chief of Police*. If you come at me ever again he's going to hear about it, and if you even *breathe* in Lucas's or his families direction I will have you locked up you *racist pig*."

"Max," Susan pleaded, taking a step towards her daughter, her arm outstretched while Neil continued to whimper on the floor in a fetal position.

"No mom," Max exclaimed, her voice shaky, her heart feeling betrayed. "How could you even let this *monster* into our lives?! I'm out of here."

She stormed past her mother to her bedroom, picking up as many items of her clothes as she could find and stuffing them into her bag, her whole body was shaking, her cheek felt like it was swelling and Max knew the wetness surrounding it wasn't from tears.

"Max," Susan wept hurrying into the bedroom and trying to stop her daughter. "He didn't mean it honey, it was all just a misunderstanding."

"Are you fucking *serious* mom?!" Max shouted, laughing in shock. "How can you be so damn stupid?" She grabbed one more shirt, deciding that she could come back for the rest.

Max pushed past her mother, intent on leaving when her heart finally gave in. She paused by the door way, her fingers tightening around the strap of her backpack. Max slowly turned to look at her crying mother.

"Come with me," she breathed. "Mom come with me. We can start a fresh. We don't need him." Max looked at Susan, her blue eyes pleading and desperate to be the one that her mother picked, for once to be the one her mother put first.

But Susan didn't. She looked down in shame and shook her head, tears rolling down her cheeks. "I'm sorry Max...I need him."

Max exhaled a sharp breath, wiping her tears and wincing when she brushed her hand across her cheek, seeing for the first time the blood that now smeared the back of her hand.

"Fine," she whispered, turning her back on her mother, walking past her step father as he cursed at her. She carried on walking, leaving it all behind, no longer wiping at the tears that fell but wearing them with pride for the mother she loved. For the mother who had chosen a different path.

Max threw her stuff in the mustang and got into the drivers side, clutching onto the steering wheel and breaking down, her forehead against the smooth leather as she cried. Her chest wretched with pain as she let it all out.

She didn't linger, gasping as she controlled her breathing and turned the key in the ignition, her beautiful car roaring to life. Max took one last glance at the house, the only true thing she had ever needed to change about herself was in that house. The darkness, the constant fear and anxiety all lived within those four walls.

A bravery unlike anything Max had known before rushed through her veins, her foot pressed down on the accelerator and she was gone, leaving the darkness in the past and moving forward.

And she didn't look back.

AN: AHHH! What a rollercoaster of a chapter! Despite the darker themes at the end I really enjoyed writing this chapter because I feel so emotionally invested in the story. I am hoping to have the final instalment out to you very soon, so please keep an eye out for that! And if you enjoyed this chapter, then PLEASE leave a review. Otherwise I won't know if you did enjoy it or not :-)

And just a final note to say HAPPY STRANGER THINGS DAY!